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SUBJECT: FIGHTING DRUG ADDICTION AND HIV/AIDS IN IRAN

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CLASSIFIED BY: Jason L Davis, Acting Consul General, Dubai, UAE.

REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

1.(S) Summary: An senior psychiatrist at the Iranian National Center for Addiction Studies gave PolEconChief January 24 an overview of Iranian tactics for fighting drug addition in Iran. The spread of HIV/AIDS has spurred the government to take a more proactive stance in combating drug addiction. Because intravenous drug use is the primary cause of the spread of HIV in Iran, the focus has been on combating drug addiction. However, sexual transmission is also being addressed. End Summary

Drug Addiction and HIV/AIDS

2.(S) Dr. Mohsen Vazirian (please project), a senior researcher and psychiatrist at the Iranian National Center for Addiction Studies and Tehran University of Medical Sciences, specializes in projects on drug addiction and HIV/AIDS. Vazirian told PolEconChief January 24 that he has been working in the field of drug addiction and HIV/AIDS for four years, a period during which the government began to focus on the health aspects of drug abuse. He said it was the threat of the spread of HIV/AIDS that spurred the government to try to tackle drug addiction. Intravenous drug use is the primary vehicle for transmission of HIV in Iran.

3.(S) The Iranian Ministry of Health issues statistics of HIV/AIDS quarterly. There are currently 12,000 registered HIV cases, but experts estimate at least 50-60,000 actual cases. Vazirian indicated that the number could be much higher, based on the findings of a journal article he co-authored, "Prevalence of and factors associated with HIV-1 infection among drug users visiting treatment centers in Tehran, Iran," published in 2005 in AIDS magazine.

4.(S) In his study of 611 drug users, 15% of injecting drug users (IDUs) tested HIV positive, and 5% of non-IDU drug users were HIV positive. There are an estimated 200,000-300,000 IDUs in Iran. Officially, the government estimates 2 million non-IDUs but the "unofficial" estimate is 5 million. Stressing this was an "unscientific" assessment, he said that extrapolating the HIV/AIDS rate of the 611 subjects tested to the wider drug population, would suggest there could be hundreds of thousands of HIV positive cases. He noted, however, that the study's sample may not be representative.

A Drug Culture

5.(S) In Vazirian's view, the tradition of opium use in Iranian culture is a contributor to the drug problem today, with many users switching from smoking opium to shooting heroin. In years past, a new bride might bring with her a block of opium to her new husband's home. Another important factor is proximity to Afghanistan, the world's largest producer of opium.

6.(S) According to Vazirian, some substances sold in Iran as cocaine are actually a mixture of heroin and cocaine, as doctors learned when addicts trying to kick a cocaine addiction suffered from heroin withdrawals. "Crystal" is used in Iran to refer to pure heroin. Synthetic drugs have gained in popularity, and are produced both inside and outside Iran. Four years ago, ecstasy was the rage; two years ago, "glass" or "shisha," a methamphetamine, hit the streets. The cost of heroin is relatively cheap - only 1000 tomans (\$1.10) a dose. A dose of ecstasy, on the other hand, runs 2-3000 tomans (\$2.20-3.30), while "glass" is 5-6000 tomans (\$5.50-6.60). Cocaine is the most expensive drug - one dose costs 100,000 tomans (\$110).

Fighting Addiction

7.(S) In addition to methadone, doctors in Iran use buprenorphine as a treatment for addicts. In most cases, the addicts pay a low fee for methadone or buprenorphine, but there are also free projects for those who cannot pay. Vazirian said there are approximately 2000 participants currently in drug substitution programs in Iran, in addition to another 2000 prison inmates on such programs. Vazirian claimed a 70% success rate in Iranian drug substitution programs.

8.(S) The study cited above noted a strong correlation in Iran between intravenous drug use in prison and HIV positive status. Vazirian said there are a lot of drugs in prisons, but few needles, and that 100-1000 inmates may share a single needle.

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Roughly half of all prisoners in Iran were arrested for drug-related crimes, including 400,000 arrests in 2005.

9.(S) Vazirian said he has not seen a change in drug policy since Ahmadinejad came into office, but he suspects that eventually there will be a shift towards greater emphasis on supply interdiction.

Combating Sexual Transmission of AIDS

10.(S) Vazirian reported that the Iranian government is not ignoring sexual transmission of AIDS, and that there are some "safe sex" awareness campaigns. He says it is estimated that in some poor areas 50% of prostitutes are IDUs, linking the two problems. He said there is a separate center at Tehran University for HIV/AIDS that focuses on prostitutes. This center has a relationship with University of California San Francisco.

11.(S) Condoms are available in pharmacies in Iran, but are not sold over-the-counter, a fact that Vazirian said may dissuade some, particularly younger people, from buying them. On the other hand, he said, condoms have been available for free for more than 20 years at government health centers, as part of efforts at population control. Per government order, health centers are to give them out to anyone who asks for them.

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